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Terrorism: Fighting Fire With Fire

Poorly Justified Actions Can Only Weaken U.S. Case

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Few issues are more perplexing for policy-makers in Washington than trying to cope with terrorism against Americans abroad. Three times in 1982-84, U.S. installations in Lebanon were bombed. Now we are told that the Central Intelligence Agency sponsored a group of counterterrorists to do something about such attacks, and that in March, acting on their own, they detonated a car bomb in Beirut with the intent of killing a Shia Muslim leader; he was not harmed, but 80 other people died.

Whether the story is exactly as reported over the weekend, much debate in Washington will now focus on procedures. How were the counterterrorists organized, and did this group get out of control? What bureaucratic infighting in the Administration was involved in this whole affair? Who leaked the story about the Lebanon bombing connection, and to what political purpose?

This is the stuff of evading difficult but more pertinent questions. Primary among them: Should the United States be involved in fighting fire with fire, in trying to preempt terrorists bent on destroying American lives or property?

There is no doubting the sense of national frustration over the Lebanon bombings. In the emotions of the moment,

Secretary of State George P. Shultz probably spoke for a majority when he vowed that we would get even. More difficult was implementing that promise to take vengeance. It did not happen. Even more ambitious was Shultz's later pledge that the United States would, when need be, follow an injunction of the Talmud: "If one comes to kill you, make haste and kill him first."

Inhibitions on U.S. counterterrorist action exist on two levels: technical and moral-political. Technically, striking back against terrorists is not simple. There must first be top-class intelligence about who has perpetrated an outrage and where this person or group can be found. Accurate knowledge is even more critical when the goal is not punishment but preemption. Then the question "Who dunit?" must change to "Will he really do it?"

Next, counterterrorist action must be conducted with precision; the possible slaughter of innocents is a nightmare.

And, finally, firm control must be exercised.

In practice, if the United States is to be involved in counterterrorism it must essentially do the job itself, not delegate it to others who could have quite different goals or simply run out of control.

This cold-blooded recitation introduces the more critical political and moral element. Whether we like it or not, the United States is in a special position. Whatever other governments may do, the United States cannot become engaged in the use of force that can be represented as indiscriminate or unprovoked. That would surely happen in an attack on suspected terrorists that either misfired or was preemptive. As the Western superpower, founded on the ideals of democracy, we are held to higher standards by our friends and neighbors and that amorphous entity, "world opinion."

To be sure, this is unfair. It is likely, for example, that the United States will gain more opprobrium from the allegations of a

free-lance bombing in Lebanon by CIA-trained counterterrorists than the Bulgarians have gained from trying to kill the Pope. The United States is expected to behave by civilized standards—the Bulgarians, Soviets and Libyans are not—and our meeting that test can be a strength of American foreign policy.

The rest of the matter is moral. In general, the phrase *preemptive counterterrorism* means assassination. For reasons that are rooted both in our values and in our history (four slain Presidents and an incumbent who nearly made it five); this is repugnant to the American people. Nor is this to be regretted. Despite all the criticism abroad of the United States and its foreign policy, we do gain respect from showing that some acts are off-limits. We do gain when the American people know that U.S. foreign policy conforms to some basic standards, that we will not descend to the level of those who seek to destroy our values along with our countrymen abroad.

Self-restraint in selecting counterterrorist weapons does not mean leaving ourselves at the mercy of our enemies. There will likely be times when force is called for, as in the attempt to rescue the U.S. hostages in Iran. Yet threatening reprisals and not carrying them out makes us more vulnerable. Responses that are not clearly justified, or that are disproportionate to the threat, can weaken our political and moral case.

Terrorism can also be fought through improved intelligence, better physical security in unstable countries, cooperation with like-minded states and efforts to eradicate political and economic causes of some terrorism. In short, countering terrorism abroad calls not for simple answers but for a complex and comprehensive strategy.

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